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REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

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From tyrannical autocracy to a most radically socialistic régime, from an empire oppressing subjugated peoples to a country proclaiming the principle of "self-determination of nationalities"—such has been the remarkable record of Russia during the past year. These changes, which have come to many as a surprise, were to those acquainted with the ferment permeating Russian life but the logical outcome of Russia's historic development.

In order to be able to interpret the trend of recent events there, events which since the overthrow of Tsarism have been moving with such bewildering rapidity, it is necessary to know what have been the forces that have shaped the life of the country. Russian evolution has come through periods of subjugation, through century long struggles for self-assertion against invaders, through many internal uprisings and through successful wars of expansion. Beginning as a small principality in the interior of a plain, Russia spread to the north and to the south, to the west and to the east until she became a world empire, in area the greatest compact country on the face of the earth, occupying 8,505,000 square miles, or larger in size than all of North America, and having a population of over 175,000,000 people.

It is a long story from the time when over a thousand years ago a delegation of Russian Slavs went to Scandinavia in search of a ruler and, according to a legend, said: "Our country is large and abundant, but there is no order in it; come and rule over us." Thus an alien dynasty, that of Rurik, established itself in the Russian land. In the seventeenth century the house of Rurik was superseded by that of Romanoff, the first Romanoff having been elected by the boyards, or nobility.

Russian Slavs in the early periods of their national existence were democratic; witness one of the oldest of Russian sayings: "If a prince is bad, into the mud with him!" Their economic and social structure was communal in character. Spreading their settlements over the plains they subjugated weaker neighbors, but they were not strong enough to withstand the onslaught of the Asiatic tribes who conquered them. It was at this time that oriental despotism, alien to the spirit of the people, was superimposed on them. The Mongolian invasion was the underlying cause of autocracy which has characterized the government of Russia until the present revolution. At first the autocratic régime was a political necessity, because a strong centralized government was needed in order to defeat Russia's enemies, the Tatars. Owing to the vastness of the sparsely populated country and to the inertia and ignorance of the inhabitants, autocracy continued to impose its will upon Russia down into the twentieth century.

The struggle against despotism has been going on for almost one hundred years, the first attempt to overthrow it and to establish a constitutional form of government having been made in 1825. The participants in this abortive movement to emancipate Russia were a few nobles, some high army officers and some intellectuals, imbued with the ideas of the French revolution. The next important uprising—that of the seventies—was led by the representatives of the bourgeoisie and the landowning nobility, mostly students in the universities and in the women's colleges. It found no support in the mass of the people; the peasants, brutalized by heavy toil, half drunk from vodka, stood aloof. During the past thirty years conditions have greatly

changed. The growth of large scale production attracted many mujiks from their poverty stricken hamlets and villages to industrial centers; there, because of natural intelligence and inherent love for freedom, they quickly learned the lessons of discontent; they were taught to understand what was really going on in the palaces of the Tsar and in the forbidding offices of his hirelings, and they became eager to follow the revolutionary leaders.

The revolt of 1904 was the first to derive some of its support from the proletariat, the laborers of the mills and factories, and from a certain part of the enlightened peasantry. The mental horizon of many mujiks was broadened by the persistent, self-sacrificing labor of those young men and women who braved the dungeon and the scaffold in order to spread throughout Russia the gospel of freedom. Although this revolution was drenched by the blood of many victims and failed to attain its object, it led, for the first time in the history of Russia, to some concessions on the part of the Tsar. The Duma came into existence, and Russia became what the *Almanac de Gotha* so aptly defined as a constitutional monarchy with an autocratic ruler.

It has been unfortunate that most people have viewed the Russian Empire through the eyes of either superficial observation or of willful misrepresentation. They have thought of Russia's masses either as homogeneous, peaceful, religious, living a life of self-contemplation, or as ignorant, servile, semi-barbarous Asiatics, threatening to descend at an opportune time upon prosperous Western Europe. In reality, the Russians are neither homogeneous, nor Asiatic, neither devoutly religious and somnolent, nor wickedly aggressive.

A great many races and nationalities are included in the 175,000,000 inhabitants comprising the population of this vast country. Furthermore, not only is the population of Russia heterogeneous, but Russian Slavs are themselves divided into different groups. We have heard so much of the inert, homogeneous people spread over vast horizonless plains that the dismemberment of Russia after the revolution has confused us. We knew of the relentless policy of russification carried on under the

Romanoffs, but we thought that only a few small national units were outside of the body politic representing the Russian element in the population; we did not question the homogeneity of the Russians themselves. But there are Russians and Russians, and in many respects they are homogeneous. Homogeneous in the manifestations of those feelings and emotions which are common to all of us, whether we come from the Ural mountains or from the sunny valleys of California; homogeneous also in the wretchedness of their surroundings, in their primitive methods of agriculture, in a certain melancholy passive submissiveness to fate as well as in outbursts of hilarious joy when the opportunity presents itself; homogeneous also in certain externalities, such as a liberal use of the samovar, fondness for *schtchi* and *kvas*, the facility with which they proclaim anathemas against real and imaginary foes, the indulgence once in a while in a hot steam bath.

Notwithstanding these common characteristics there have existed since their earliest history three distinct branches of Russians. In the eighth century, perhaps earlier, a stream of slavic colonization advanced east from the Danube and occupied the plains of southwestern Russia; these are the Little Russians or Ukrainians who number at present about 27,000,000. Another stream of colonization, the Great Russians, came from the Elbe, through the basin of the Vistula and occupied the central and northern parts of Russia; the Great Russians represent the largest single element in the Russian population, numbering over 60,000,000. The smallest group are the White Russians, about 6,000,000 souls. The original differences between these branches of Russians were increased by contact with different nationalities, the Great Russians with the Finns, the Little Russians with the Turks and the White Russians with the Lithuanians.

An important element in the Russian population has been the Cossacks, who dwell on the steppes of Southern Russia where the rivers Dnieper, Don and Volga empty themselves into the Black, the Azov and the Caspian seas. As hunters and fishermen they led a semi-nomadic existence and because of the danger of

attacks by the Tatars they were always armed. As time went on the Cossacks increased in numbers through their acceptance of every outlaw, every runaway serf, every discontented nobleman. In the free life of the steppes they developed those qualities of restless aggressiveness which later made them a menace to the Turks, to the Poles and to the Muscovites. Through centuries they were the keepers of the crude Russian conceptions of liberty and of equality, and later on as the deputies in the Duma they proved radical and fearless. Most of the Cossacks are Little Russian in speech and but a few of them, the Kalmucks, are Mongolian in origin; the Kalmucks were subdued by the Don Cossacks and became a part of their organization.

Amongst other races and nationalities that dwell on Russian territory may be mentioned in the order of their numerical superiority—the Poles, the Finns, the Jews, the Lithuanians, the Tatars, the Kirghiz, the Germans, the Roumanians, the Bashkirs, the Georgians, the Armenians, and the Circassians.

One of the contributory causes to the success of the present revolution was the autocratic policy of oppressing not only individuals but entire nations, and not only alien nations, but nations of Russian stock; and one of the first results of this revolution was the separatist agitation in all parts of the empire. It was the oppressed, embittered peoples that led the movement for revolt and helped to throw off the yoke of despotism, and the leaders of New Russia recognizing this were from the very first willing to accede to claims for separation. The dismemberment of Russia is not due to the Bolsheviki. It started before the seizure of power by the Maximalists and it would have occurred under any government of freed Russia.

The idea that Russia is Asiatic was "made in Germany." It is the product of German Junkerdom concocted partially in order to intimidate the German people into bearing the heavy burden of militarism placed upon them, partially to alienate from Russia the sympathies of the Western world thus leaving her an easier victim to German machinations. Official Germany ceased fearing Russia long ago. In the eighteenth century and during the first half of the nineteenth century, when Germany was a nation

of philosophers, musicians and poets, when she was divided into many independent kingdoms and principalities whose strength and glory was not in the sword but in the pen, she may have genuinely dreaded attacks from Imperialistic Russia. But Germany united by blood and iron, militaristic, Prussianized Germany never feared Russia; she merely feigned the fear, and she did it so well as to deceive completely even her own people.

With German colonists occupying some of Russia's best lands, with German merchants and bankers established in all the leading cities of Russia, with German spies honeycombing the country, with German officials permeating the Russian administration, the Russian army and the Russian court, with a German Tsarina on the Russian throne, Germany knew Russia too well to fear her. In fact she feared her so little that at the outbreak of hostilities she practically denuded her Eastern frontier of troops; it was only when Grand Duke Nicholas took his task of aiding the Allies seriously and advanced into Prussian territory that Germany rushed back from France a part of her army in order to drive away the invaders.

The Russians are not Asiatic. It is true that within the confines of Russia, there are many millions of Tatars, Kirghiz, Bashkirs and other oriental tribes; but these form a comparatively small minority in the sum total of the Russian population and it was not to these that official Germany referred when she insidiously propagated the view that Russians are oriental savages. And even while spreading this view Germany was "peacefully penetrating" into Russia and helping to maintain there the only remnant of Asia—that cruel and corrupt despotism which was superimposed upon a democratic people at the time of the Tatar invasion. It was to official Germany's advantage to support oriental despotism in Russia, to keep in ignorance and poverty the Russian masses, just as it was to her advantage to organize pogroms against Jews whom she regarded as one of the obstacles to her scheme for the commercial exploitation of this rich country. We have all heard of the Cossacks and of the rôle they have played in killing striking laborers, students and Jews, but it is not so well known that usually the

wildest of the Cossack tribes, the Kalmucks, were selected for this cruel work and even these were often led not by their own men but by German officers who faithfully executed the orders of the Tsar or his intriguing advisers.

The Russians are not Asiatic. Russian contributions to literature, to painting, to music, to science, all bear witness to the fact that they are of the West and not of the East. It is the spirit of the West that animates the poems of Pushkin and of Lermontov, the novels of Tolstoy and of Turgenev, the stories of Chekhov and of Kuprin; it is the spirit of the West that expresses itself in the symphonies of Tschaikowsky and of Rimsky-Korsakov, in the paintings of Vereshchagin and of Repin. The only manifestation of orientalism which can be discerned in the Russian people is the quality of nonresistance; and this may be due not to the fatalism of the Orient, the result of religious belief, but to the influences of geographic environment, to the vast expanse of barren wastes, of impassable marshes and primeval forests over which sweep unchecked the icy winds from the north. In such an environment the people of a sparsely settled country, if they lack the energy, the initiative and the perseverance which characterize the frontiersmen, feel themselves more or less helpless. Russian mujiks, in their wretched huts, faced desolation for so long, shivering from cold or parched by heat, they endured for so long the gnawing pangs of hunger, watching their children die from malnutrition and ravaging disease, that they became too benumbed to resist what seemed to them the inevitable.

It took three years of the most horrible war in Russian history to undermine the power of the strongly entrenched, crafty semi-German bureaucracy which ruled over the land. But these three dreadful years have served at least one good cause; they have forced even the dullest of peasants to think and to rebel. One of the chief factors which brought into action the latent powers of the peasant was prohibition. Prohibition which was originally introduced as a temporary war measure at the time of the first mobilization proved so enormously beneficial that at the request of the peasants themselves it remained on the

statute books; this more than any one thing helped the peasant to the consciousness of his manhood. The revolution of 1917, unlike many abortive attempts which preceded it, found a sober Russia ready to follow her liberators.

Another important reason for the success of the revolution has been the almost total elimination of the Tsar's strongest weapon, the old, servile army. Killed, disabled, imprisoned, this army was replaced by one composed chiefly of peasant soldiers who were in service but a few months before the outbreak of the revolt; and these new soldiers in the memorable day of March, 1917, refused to shoot on laborers in whom they recognized fellow sufferers.

The present power of the socialists in general and of the Bolsheviks in particular may be attributed to the fact that under the stress of the war the Russian machinery of production and distribution collapsed. With a government not bent on doing its best, but scheming and plotting to betray the people, the capitalistic order of society in Russia proved its utter inefficiency and helplessness. Even under the most far-sighted and capable leadership agricultural Russia, with her infant industries, her sparse population, her inadequate railway system, her wretched highways, would have had an almost superhuman task not to succumb in her fight with the most powerful industrial and military nation of Europe. As it was, three years of warfare absorbed most of her available resources and brought her to the brink of financial and economic ruin. The discontent became widespread, famine in many parts of the country imminent.

Little wonder that, after the overthrow of autocracy, the poor and the suffering, the cold and the hungry, were willing to accept any régime that promised them relief. Ignorant of what were the real causes of the calamity that overwhelmed them, bewildered by the appearance of various political parties, incapable of examining the validity of the claims of opposing factions, the mass of the people accepted the leadership of those who spoke most loudly, acted most vigorously and who promised them the greatest amount of prosperity and the quickest way to peace and to leisure. These bewildered masses are not traitors; they are the victims of circumstances.

The Russian mujik—75 per cent of the Russian population are mujiks—knows nothing of the meaning and of the obligations of a state. Until the abdication of the Tsar, the state and the Tsar were inseparably associated in his mind; it was by looking at the ubiquitous picture of the “Little Father,” to be found even in the most wretched hut, that he in a dim, subconscious way visualized the power, the dignity and the sovereignty of the state; that state which oppressed him, to which he owed obedience and taxes, but which in its pomp and glory was something mysterious, far removed from his miserable work-a-day existence. After the revolution the Tsar and with him the state suddenly disappeared. The mujik was told that he was free, and this freedom meant to him peace, food, land.

Russia's withdrawal from the war was not due to the Bolsheviks. The ministries of Lvov and of Kerensky were deposed largely because they wanted to continue the struggle against the Central Powers. Russia was weary of what seemed to her an unequal contest. Both the soldiers at the front and the people back of the trenches, not realizing what was really at stake, were clamoring for peace. For three years Russian armies poorly fed and clad, without the necessary arms and ammunition, betrayed by many of their generals, fought a losing, hopeless fight with the enemy. Millions of Russian soldiers were killed, maimed or taken prisoners to work as slaves in Germany while their families were starving at home. Old armies were wiped out and new ones were formed; these latter continued to fight not knowing why; they fought while the Tsar's ministers were maintaining secret communications with the German leaders; they fought stubbornly and bravely. And then came the Tsar's forced abdication.

Germany took immediate advantage of the confusion that ensued. While the Allies were undecided, lukewarmly supporting the provisional government and waiting for further developments, Germany distributed throughout Russia millions of anti-war and anti-Allies pamphlets, sent there thousands of her most skillful agents, and helped to bring back many of Russia's exiled visionaries and fanatics. Kerensky's order

democratizing the army helped her plans. This order was issued because the revolutionary government feared that some of the generals of the old régime were not true to the cause of the revolution. The new government had every reason to distrust a docile army, obedient to its officers; too often in the past had such an army been used in Russia to defeat the aims of the people. But the troops without discipline fell an easy prey to German machinations. Their morale was quickly destroyed and then nothing stood in the way of Germany's advance into the heart of Russia.

As yet we have no evidence to substantiate the charge that the leaders of the Bolsheviks are in reality paid agents of Germany. So much has been made of the fact that Lenin came to Russia after the proclamation of political amnesty via Germany. There are obvious reasons why Germany was willing to let Lenin and perhaps hundreds of other agitators go through her territory. She knew them to be possessed of fanatical ideas, embittered against capitalism in general and against the capitalistic class in Russia in particular; she knew how great would be their influence amongst the half dazed, just liberated people, hungry for bread, for land, for peace. In the confusion, the chaos which their arrival into Russia would create, Germany saw the opportunity to serve her purpose.

It is also comprehensible why the Bolsheviks accepted the temporary hospitality of the German railways. They were bent on getting to Russia in the quickest possible way, and it was immaterial to them how they went. They would have gone via New Zealand or Guatemala just as well, could they have made greater haste.

Those who have been viewing the Russian situation from one angle only, that of the Allied cause, cannot understand the feelings which animated some of these expatriates and exiles as they sped towards Russia. With them the great war, which means so much to us, was a secondary issue. They were dreaming, talking, writing of another, to them a much greater war—the war of the liberation of toilers from the oppression of capitalists, wherever these toilers or these capitalists might be. We may

sneer at the impracticability of their ideas, we may shudder at the thought as to where the success of their efforts may lead, we may pity those who either driven by hunger or swayed by their emotions follow such leaders, but we should not, unless we are perfectly sure of our ground, speak of them as paid agents of the German government.

Official Germany does not wish anything better than that we should believe that the Maximalists are traitors, and that because of this belief we should forsake the new Russian Republic. Thus forsaken Russia will continue to be a victim of Germany in the future as she has been her victim in the past.

Even grave mistakes committed in Russia at such a critical time should not prevent the United States from keeping ever in mind the thought that the Russian masses have made a long and brave fight for political emancipation and that the freedom which they seek has as high an ideal as has ever been held by any people.